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ABSTRACT

Blacks have been deprived of dignity, pride, and self-esteem by societal conditioning, a denial and lack of knowledge of the black self, and the pervasive presence of disasters and near disasters. Blacks have been victimized and stultified by society's negative attitudes towards them. These negative responses have created a profound lack of knowledge of African societies and black achievement. The daily struggle for life in the environment of the inner city does not help most blacks develop a sense of pride and dignity. Exposure to malicious influences there creates normlessness and a cycle of despair. The best solution is for responsible elders in the black community to work together with churches and social agencies to offer programs that will inform black youth about their ethnic and family heritage, and allow them to discuss the black self. Parents must also be involved in black history and black self group sessions. (PS)

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Is Black History a Partial Answer?

In the "Call for Papers" which reached my desk from the National Black Child Development Institute, the following statement is made: **"Actions taken by Black Youth that limit future options - teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, suicide, criminal activities, school failure, and dropping out of school - are symptoms of a larger problem ranging from a lack of self esteem and pride to a bleak outlook for the future."**

Therein lie the **problems** and the **sources** of the problems in a nutshell in summary form. If the sources - lack of self esteem and pride to a bleak outlook for the future - are examined further, we find embedded in the black psyche three roots which are important. These three roots are (1) societal conditioning, (2) a denial and lack of knowledge of the Black Self, and (3) the pervasive presence of disasters and near disasters. Now let me explain what is meant by these roots. I don't wish to be misunderstood.

Societal Conditioning

For more than 300 years black people have been "conditioned" immeasureably and "programmed" by environmental circumstances: what they hear and see. The actions and reactions of many black youth have been governed by the merciless onslaught of societal attitudes, values, and beliefs of the greater society. One can say that, indeed, all youth are governed in precisely the same way. And yet, many of these attitudes, values, and beliefs place Blacks at a distinct and clear disadvantage.

History has been unkind - certainly that part of history about us which we tend to hear (or read) of the most and that which appears in the standard textbooks. We have suffered and been dwarfed by half-truths, misconceptions, innuendos, and plain lies. We have suffered and been dwarfed by the unremitting and consistent barrage of well-aimed slights. The former Secretary of State Rusk,

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once said of us, "It is a miracle of the human spirit" that we have survived. And I would add, parenthetically, that not only have we survived, but many of us have prospered in spite of this societal conditioning forced upon us by the outside other.

It has been going on a long time. In fact, it was Thomas Jefferson who remarked many years ago, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." He was making specific reference to the slave system, and the bind into which Whites placed themselves with regard to the treatment of Blacks.

Certainly, history cannot be changed. The most of us have come out of the slave culture. All of us have suffered due to denial and misstatement of fact, with a beginning which goes back to the times when white slavers and willing black collaborators on the West Coast of Africa set up a business which brought our ancestors to these shores in chains. And as time went on due to the horrors of the slave system, it became necessary for Whites to constantly justify their actions or live with a kind guilt which was most un-comfortable. It seems that they chose justification.

Not only was there the need to claim that slaves were happy and content, but distinctly negative qualities created by the slave system itself were freely dissiminated. These fabrications and distortions received further embroidery. They have been handed down, generationally, and are still repeated. When they are not repeated, actions are taken which are indicative of the fact that the misstatements are still believed.

As a result, Blacks go through the life cycle carrying excessive and heavy baggage. Even though slavery vanished more than 120 years ago, the fact remains that our psychic load is heavy. It appears, sometimes, that we cannot unburden ourselves. Even those who have come to these shores much later have the need to pick up and carry out the same patterns. They sense the need to carry forth in order to enhance their own positions.

What I am saying is that the greater society constantly justifies its actions. Even those made 50 years ago must be justified. And what better way to justify previous behavior (and needs) in a multi-racial society than by maligning the victim? Say it often enough and people believe it. Even the victim believes it in many instances. And what he sees around himself would tend to support what has been stated. This is heavy baggage. It is a burdensome load which we cannot seem to free ourselves of. And the outside other cries out, "Didn't I tell you so.?"

What I am saying is that not only have we been victimized by the maligning, but we have also been stultified and paralyzed by it. The malignment has been all too effective upon the victim and also upon the outside other.

Generationally, attitudes have been passed on socially. Attitudes affected our fathers and their fathers and their fathers; our mothers and their mothers and their mothers. This well-planned legacy of denial and isolation; this legacy of distortions, lies, half-truths, and deprecatory philosophy is engrained. It has worked its way into the weave of the culture itself and is taken for granted by Whites and many Blacks and others. It is heavy baggage indeed.

As a result, we have doubts about the Black Self: hair, skin color, lip eversion, and our broad noses. Rather than accept them, we look to the European notions of beauty as the hallmark standard. Doubts have been placed in our minds about our mental capacities by some schools of psychologists.

The Black Self

It is true that we cannot change our being. We cannot become native Africans. And even if we could, I am not at all certain that such would be meaningful in the American Society. About the most we can do in this regard is change our names, and even give to our children African names. In many ways, such for some may be the first step toward seeing themselves more positively. But certainly, other conditions remain the same.

Regardless, we are native born Americans. We are not Nigerians, Ghanaians or Sengalese. We are native born Americans who have inherited patterns, attitudinal qualities which are distinctly Afro-American; we as all others are taught to salute the flag, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, serve in wars, and become model citizens in spite of the heavy baggage.

Now, upon careful analysis, anybody in his right mind; anybody with an ounce of fairness and concern recognizes for what it is that Black Americans do carry a psychic overload. And not only that, there are no other people in the American society forced to do the same thing. Think carefully about that. No people are asked to carry the same load, even though some Asians, perhaps, may feel that their circumstances are similar. My belief is that they are wrong. They have not hauled the weight in their native land for more than three hundred years. Black people have.

Blacks should know that many African societies considered "white" ugly. We should know that "whiteness" was (and probably still is) not a virtue in most African societies. We do not have that history nor orientation.

Not only is there among Black Americans a profound lack of knowledge of African societies; a lack of philosophical underpinnings and foundations about ourselves, but there is also a lack of positive traditions as the Jewish people have by way of celebration.

It is probably true that most black youth do not know of the extraordinary attainments of black people from colonial times to the present. Black history did not begin with Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. It did not begin with Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. It did not begin in colonial times of this society. In fact it began in Africa with great kingdoms which flourished with societies and governments, most of which were humane. Black History reaches back well into the dawn of civilization.

Does the black youth know that slaves were even chosen in many instances because of the skills they could afford to plantation life? They came as skilled agriculturalists, they came as men with iron making skills, they came as healthy specimen, and survived the notorious middle passage.

And I am saying our youth problems stem from this lack of knowledge; our youth problems grow out of a denial of their essence. In spite of the fact that there is nothing inherently wrong with a dark brown skin, flared nostrils, and kinky-hair, you may have heard your own child say at age five , while looking at TV that he/she "wish I were white," with a light skin and straight hair. At that moment, and probably from sometime before, he starts to pack his psychic bags. The baggage grows heavier and heavier. Herein lies part of the answer.

There is a gigantic compendium of black achievement called "Who's Who Among Black Americans." But how important is it, really? Do black children understand it? How is it used? For ego-tripping of those listed there? Simply as a reference source? Thousands of noteworthy achievements are listed there, from black airlines pilots to architects, to engineers and zoologists. Is its analysis of any meaning to black youths? I merely cite this as an example and raise some rhetorical questions.

Due to the psychic overload, it is somehow easier to sense and feel the possibility of failure than to sense and feel the possibility of success. It is easier for vast numbers of us to sense and feel prejudice rather than sense and feel pride.

A denial of the Black Self, a lack of knowledge of the Black Self are major causes. Traditionally, we have been guided by statements and views of the outside other due to our position within the society. We have taken too lightly the importance of knowledge about ourselves. Instead, we have simply tried to find a place for ourselves within a system which has been notoriously unresponsive to the problems which the society created. Black people did not create the problem.

White people did. As a result, the black youth has to be taught this. **Black People are the American society's burdensome history lesson.**

The fact that we have succeeded and overcome barriers, road blocks and obstacles in spite of a philosophy and spirit which has tended to denigrate the very essence of our being, is indicative of towers of strength, and reservoirs of resilliency within ourselves. In fact, in this paper we are concerned primarily with youth who are vulnerable. Clearly, all black youth are not vulnerable. Imagine for a moment what would have been the case if we had all started on an equal footing. If we had started the race without being handicapped.

Presence of Disasters and Near-Disasters

The black family has often been exposed to the rugged and hard life of the inner city. It is a fact that most of us reside in such areas. And it is there where we encounter the storms of apathy and dismay. It is there where we are caught in the whirlwinds of disaster.

Let it be understood that I know all families are not struck down by the tornadoes of trouble. Some of us are left standing like lone pillars, strong and unwilling to fall. But where there is a frequency of storms, the toll is higher. And I maintain that this toll includes many black families and thus many of our youth. They become caught up in the whirlwinds of waywardness, of apathy, and none too gentle anti-social peer pressure. I want it understood that I know disaster can strike also at those of us in the world of Jack and Jill, suburban shopping malls, split level houses, and two one year old imported European cars.

I do believe that the proximity to disaster and near disasters of the inner city where most of us live is an important element, related to how our children see themselves. There is a constant exposure to all nefarious outcroppings: drug use, drug sales, prostitution, unwanted pregnancies, welfare, joblessness, poor housing, and in some cases what the sociologist Robert K. Merton, and Emile Durkheim

before him, have described as **anomie** - a societal affliction described best as normlessness; where there is a complete breakdown of morals; where the traditional folkways and mores of normative conduct are cast aside.

Some of us have chosen little islands within this setting and tried to isolate ourselves by choice; others of us are in the morass of it, not by choice, but because of other elements such as has been described earlier. In either case, there is the exposure. In many ways we are one and the same. I might add that personally I have opted for the inner city. And sometimes with the rearing of children I have wondered whether it was a good choice or not a good choice. Does affluence, quality of familial life and where it is manifest have some bearing? I suspect it has great bearing.

Life styles of friends, playmates, the ever presence of those who are forever attempting to rip off the system, babies having babies, school drop-outs and the school system's inadequacies, the cycle of welfare where in some families a child has never seen anybody get up and go to work of a morning, those peddling drugs and making slaves of his brothers and sisters, women selling their bodies to frequent bidders - I maintain that such patterns influence profoundly those caught in the grinding circumstances. And many of these conditions go back to the traditional intergenerational philosophy, attitudes, and values handed down.

It is a cycle of despair. There are so many negative distractions. There are so many obvious failures (which are not necessarily perceived as failures) of which one discovers at an earlier age. Varied observable degrees of apparent abilities to cope under the circumstances may indeed be altogether enticing. One finds his status group. She finds her reference group, and the modelling process begins which may last a lifetime. Thought processes, values and standards become oriented toward failure.

Unfortunately, those of us who have the capacity create change and make for a positive difference have too often decided only to speak about it, make abortive forays toward change, or otherwise wring our hands in dismay.

I will say to you this: only those of us who have an understanding of the problems and sources of problems faced by our children can do something about it. The changes needed are not going to be made by the federal government, the state governments, nor local governments. And if they are made by those political entities, you and I must serve as the catlysts for the change. To tell you the truth, I am not at all certain that the problem is governmental. It is incumbent upon organizations as the Black Child Development Institute, and others with knowledge and skill, to create an atmosphere which allow for more positive views of one s youthful Black Self . Now, whether one sees the issues as I see them is unimportant. But one would have to conclude that efforts must be made to correct situations which, in some cases, are reaching disastrous proportions. There is the need to change how young black people, and including their families, are inclined to see themselves. I do not consider such to be an easy task. But nor do I consider the needed processes esoteric, unreachable, or some theory couched in deep and scholarly psychological terminology.

I believe the three things I have mentioned to be major causes of the problems which have been outlined in "the Call for Papers." I had started to add a fourth category to be called Lingering Inequities. And then it dawned upon me that much of such would be repetitive of what has been stated. In a sense one could say, summarily, that the problems we face with black youth are due to lingering inequities and access; lingering inequities due to excess baggage all of us travel with which has been acquired by ascription. It is burdensome.

In order to overcome these problems, and or meet the needs of many youths, what must be done? What should be done, for example, to instill cultural pride and self-esteem in black youths? What programs can be implemented or

what activities can be conducted to enhance the quality of perception of the Black Self? The questions raised by the National Black Child Institute are good questions. I have chosen to deal with only three or four of them and I urge you to bear with me to the end.

Needs

I believe that the following four questions can be answered, in part, with the implementation of the program outlined. The four questions are:

1. How can the family and community help children and youth deal with pressures from their peers and the society-at-large that influence negative behaviors?

2. What programs can be implemented or activities conducted to enhance the quality of life for Black children and youth?

3. How can cultural pride and self esteem be instilled in black children and youth?

4. How can advocates help local and state governments, and city agencies better meet the needs of black children, youth and families?

First of all, by way of preface to discussing needs, let me state that overtime, the church (religious institutions) and the family are the two most important institutions. Next in line come the school and the social agencies - certainly for our purposes. And when I say "social agency" I am referring to the independent youth serving social agency as a settlement house, neighborhood house, and not

specifically the recreation agency. To some lesser extent, I believe any social agency which serves youth in their leisure time can be most helpful in achieving goals (growing out of needs) about to be stated. I believe it fair to state that careful use of leisure time is an important aspect related to our problems here.

These settings can be most effective over a period of time, if what I am about to suggest is provided on a continuing, well-ordered, and persistent basis. There are no elixers which can be administered which will bring us immediate relief. Overall, we have to look these efforts longitudinally.. And the key here is the use of leisure-time. It would be wrong to say that nothing can be be accomplished in the schools. On the other hand, schools are mandated political institutions. Some are mixed and others are all-black. Depending upon locality, schools may be used to provide some of the programs suggested.

In addition to the use of leisure time, the following also seem important: (1) that such programming should begin with the child aged three years or thereabout - from the time the child recognizes that he or she is **a me**; from the time there is a conscious recognition of a **unique self.** (2) that parents with children between the ages of three and twelve should be invited to participate, and that they should know there is a resource which can be helpful to the overall well-being of black children. (3) that black youth between the ages of thirteen years and eighteen years should be encouraged to participate.

I have emphasized the years three to twelve because I consider them within the range where such programs can be most helpful. The same applies to parents of children within this age range. After age twelve or so, the child moves further away from home, becomes more easily influenced by peers, and has a longer tether as he asserts himself and seeks greater independence. This is not all bad. The chances are he doesn't come home by dark always; he is more likely to venture forth in places where he might not be expected to be; the testing process (between parent and child) increases.

Ideally, for some of the activity suggested there should be trained and paid staff. In most probabilities there won't be unless organization is created for fund-raising locally and aimed at achieving the objectives. I hasten to point out that volunteers can also serve well, providing they are fully cognizant of methods, contents, and have some familiarity with youth, working with people, and the goals. Volunteers should go through an orientation and training before attempting to tackle the tasks at hand.

Certainly the church, the school, the leisure time agency, and even the home can serve as a good setting for conducting the programs on a scheduled, planful, and meaningful basis. If what is suggested could be offered **to every black child, at his level of comprehension and on a continuing basis at least two times weekly**, we would begin to see differences. But there has to be consistency.

Naturally, there will be less progress where infection has already set in. However, thinking can be reoriented with repetitive and consistent efforts.

There is perhaps one area which stands apart, and that is **a Day of Solemn Remembrance and Celebration.**

There should be at least one day of the year when Blacks would allow themselves to dwell on black martyrs, the meaning of being Black in a multi-racial society, and reviewing all of that which has contributed to our being. The family unit should endeavor to recall and celebrate together. Stories should be told, songs should be sung, plays and skits should be written which can be done on that day. Each family member three years of age and older should have a role. In some cases, several families might celebrate together. The oldest person of each family should have the responsibility of recalling from his past and commenting. Such should be done religiously on an annual basis. The most likely day for such activity is that day when the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. is celebrated.

Black History

Black children between the ages of three and twelve years should be taught Black History two days weekly. Each session should last between forty-five minutes and one hour. Black History should be taught at a level of easy comprehension for groups of eight to twelve people. Younger children must be involved in movement: arts and crafts, dance, song, and a minimum of discussion as such. Young people aged seven through twelve can have 45 minutes of discussion about Black History, including heroines and heroes, reference models, etc.

There should also be Black History for those persons over twelve years of age two days weekly, with opportunities for serious exploration and discussion of the Black Past.

Discussions on the Black Self

Each child between the ages of twelve and fourteen, and fifteen and up (two age groupings) should have the opportunity of discussing the Black Self; its meaning in this society. The child should be encouraged to avoid pitfalls which will make for trouble and difficulty. Drug use, teen pregnancy, societal codes and standards, anti-social behaviors should be freely dealt with. In fact, all facets of the society and how black people fit into it should be discussed. An emphasis should be placed upon behavior which is favorable and not that which isn't. At the same time activities should occur which involve the group in planning for themselves under competent direction. An attempt should be made to account for the use of time.

Parents Groups

Parents, and especially those whose children are vulnerable, should be invited to attend Black History and the Black Self group sessions. They should also receive guidance and direction with regard to parenting on a planful and scheduled basis. Parents should be helped to understand the problems faced by

youths, environmental circumstances, and furthermore they should be helped to devise suitable means of coping with assorted distractions and street lures. Ready individual counselling should also be available to them.

Implementation

It seems to me important to point out that all black children are not vulnerable to "self-destructive behaviors." Certainly many are. An untutored black sage once said "All black people ain't po' an' all po' people ain't black." It would appear that the statement has some application here.

The National Black Child Development Institute is in the position of being able to put such a plan or a variant, into action through the use of associate members, and by **appealing to churches** initially with an explanation of the need for devices which help to eliminate self-destructive behaviors. What I have stated can be helpful primarily with the three or four questions raised earlier - and aimed fundamentally at cultural pride and self-esteem.

I believe it also important to try and convince **public assistance collectivities** of the need to cooperate with the National Black Child Development Institute in achieving its goals. And I suspect this may be a much more onerous task. I can see many kinds of issues arising which affords them ways not to be helpful.

NBCDI should **develop generic outlines** which can be used by all participants, discussants and leaders, as it attempts to deal with the Black Self and Black History. I will happily lend what skills I have to the overall process, in part because I feel that knowledge of the Black Self and Black History are all important in instilling pride and self-esteem along with other personal factors as well.

Thirdly, NBCDI might **consider fund-raising** for the purpose of carrying out these goals related to raising Black Conscience levels and examining the Black Self. The goals can be achieved through volunteers, if such is persistent and

unyielding. Unfortunately, our society is such that leaders may be more responsive if they are paid stipends.

I hope this presentation has given you some "food for thought," and some practical (and perhaps impractical) steps which might be taken to enhance Black Dignity, Pride, and Self-Esteem. I do not feel that the answers lie, necessarily, in deep and profoundly entangling psychological theories. For the majority, it is a matter of "getting on top of the situation," understanding it for what it is, and moving forward in a way which is meaningful. Vulnerable black youth have to be made to understand the possibilities and the options. **It is left up to us, their responsible elders, to clear the paths for them to walk.** I thank you for listening.